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ABSTRACT

A project was undertaken at San Juan College, in New Mexico, to examine findings from several studies of student persistence and retention to shed light on factors influencing persistence at the college. The project took into account several definitions of persistence, including re-enrollment in the subsequent semester (semester to semester), re-enrollment the following fall semester (fall to fall), and persistence in relation to indicators of student educational goals such as full-time or degree seeking status. Results of the project indicated the following: (1) in 1991 and 1992, fall to fall persistence rates for part-time (PT) degree seeking students were 42% and 35%, respectively, and 59% and 46% for full-time (FT) degree-seeking students; (2) semester to semester persistence rates for fall 1993 were 79% for FT students and 45% for PT students, with higher fall to spring persistence rates than spring to fall rates; (3) in general, FT, regular students persisted at higher rates than part-time or provisional students; (4) 54% of students who left after one semester reported that they had achieved their educational goals; (5) common reasons for students not returning after the first semester included a lack of desired courses (15%), family responsibilities (14%), and job (12%) responsibilities; and (6) 28% of non-returners planned to re-enroll at the college within the following year. (MAB)

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Persistence and Attrition at San Juan College

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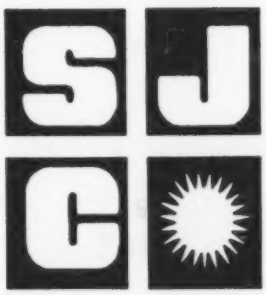
by

Dr. Nelle Moore



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Introduction

Student persistence and retention are important indicators of success for post-secondary institutions. Persistence can be defined in several ways such as

1) re-enrolling in the subsequent semester (semester to semester),

2) re-enrolling the following fall semester (fall to fall), and

3) limiting the students included in the persistence study by various factors such as full-time status, degree seeking status, or other indicators of educational goal.

This report will examine data from several persistence studies. Comparisons of persistence rates derived by different methods will be made in order to get a clearer understanding of facets that contribute to persistence at San Juan College.

At a community college, attrition rates are usually quite high. When persistence is used as a measure of quality, community colleges are often embarrassed at their inability to justify and explain these high attrition rates. There can be many reasons for failure to persist, especially for community college students, such as

1) transfer to a 4-year institution,

2) graduation,

3) lack of student commitment to education,

4) lack of student skills, or

5) achievement of short-term educational/personal goal.

To determine more about students who do not persist at San Juan College, a study was conducted on students who enrolled for only one semester. These students were interviewed to determine why they had not re-enrolled and to what extent they had achieved their educational goal. The results of this study are presented in this report.

What is the persistence rate at SJC?

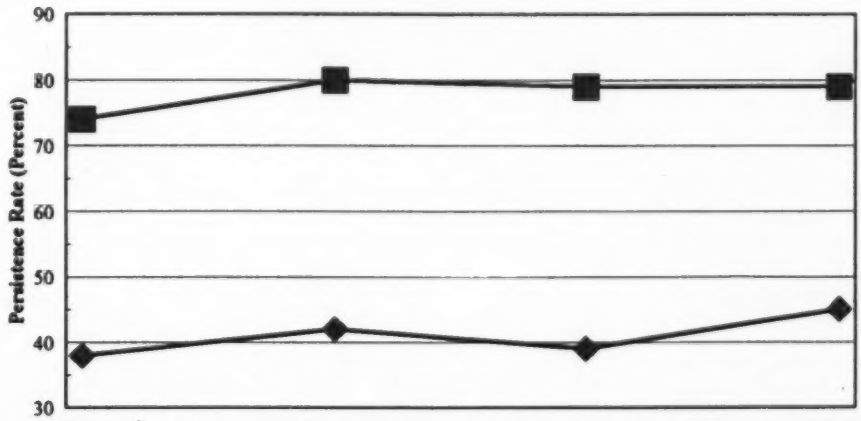
SJC annually publishes one-year persistence rates (fall to fall) for first-time, regular, degree seeking students (Student Right-to-Know). For the two years of data reported so far, the persistence rate for part-time students was 42% and 35%, and for full-time students was 59% and 46%.

Table 1
Fall to Fall Persistence Rates
for Regular Students

Cohort	Part-time	Full-time
1991	42%	59%
1992	35%	46%

Another way of looking at persistent is whether new students come back the following semester. Semester-to-semester persistence for all first-time, full-time students since Fall 1990, shown in Figure 1, ranges from 74% to 80%. The same persistence rate for first-time, part-time students ranges from 38% to 45%. Fall to Spring persistence rates are much higher than Spring to Fall persistence rates, which range from 49% to 55% for full-time students and from 22% to 28% for part-time students.

Figure 1
Semester-to-Semester Persistence Rate
of First-time Students
by Full-time/Part-time



Cohort	Fa90	Fa91	Fa92	Fa93
Full-time ■	74	80	79	79
Part-time ◆	38	42	39	45

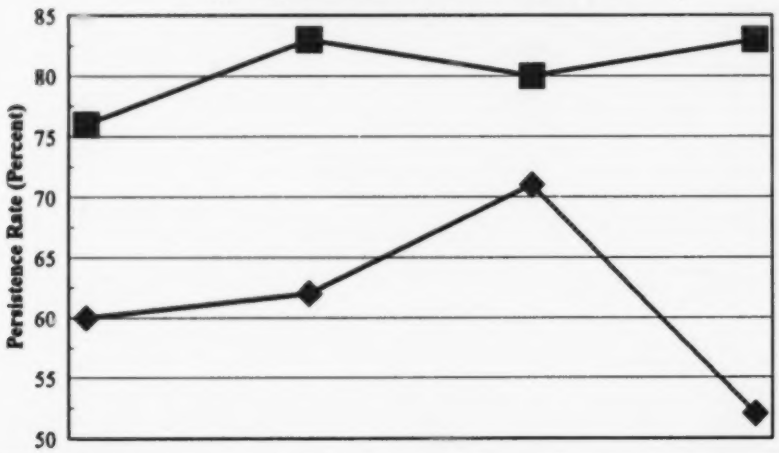
Which students are more likely to have the intention of persisting?

When considering student persistence as an indicator of institutional success, the measure must first be controllable or at least affected by actions of the institution rather than by forces that are outside of the control of the institution. It is for this reason that persistence studies often exclude from the study students who enroll without the intent of persisting and include only students who intend to persist - as nearly as can be determined.

One could conclude from the previous charts that full-time students are more likely to have the intention of persisting than part-time students. Full-time students are more likely to have made a commitment to achieving a long-term educational goal than part-time students. A comparison of fall- and spring-entry students shows that students who intend to persist are more likely to start in the Fall semester. Regular enrollment requires submission of a high school transcript and is therefore further evidence of a long-term commitment to achieving an educational goal. Figure 2 below examines only full-time students and divides these by regular or provisional enrollment.

The semester-to-semester persistence rate of full-time, regular students varies from 76% to 83% and varies from 52% to 71% for full-time provisional students. From this data, the pool of full-time, regular students clearly demonstrates a higher persistence rate than part-time or provisional students. Studies of persistence at San Juan College should be limited to Fall entry, full-time, regular students in order to focus on students who are the most likely to have the intention of persisting.

Figure 2
Semester-to-Semester Persistence Rate
of First-time, Full-time Students
By Regular/Provisional Enrollment



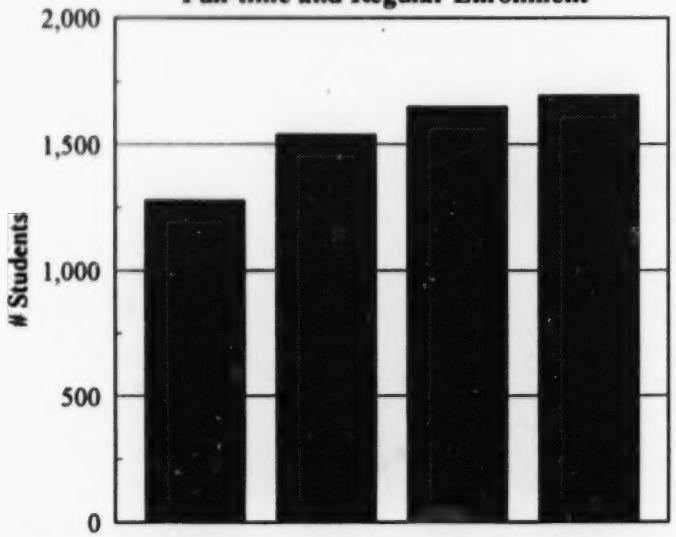
Cohort	Fa90	Fa91	Fa92	Fa93
Regular ■	76	83	80	83
Provisional ◆	60	62	71	52

About a quarter of the students who enroll for the first time may have long-term educational goals at SJC.

By limiting a persistence study to full-time students, between 60% to 74% of the initial first-time students are excluded. By further eliminating provisional students, between 74% to 76% of the initial pool of first-time students are excluded from the study. This exclusion process indicates that for SJC, only 24% to 26% of students who enroll for the first time may have long-term educational goals at this institution. Figure 3 below shows the number of students who should be retained in persistence studies compared to the total cohort of first-time entering students.

This process of eliminating students from persistence studies by gross enrollment categories will unfortunately exclude some students who have long-term educational goals. In fact, in the latest survey of graduates (N=170), 16% of the respondents took more than four years to complete a one or two year degree/certificate. The difficulty in conducting persistence studies however, is that the information collected about student's educational intentions is imprecise and student's goals can change. While many of our students exhibit Herculean efforts to complete their long-term goals, it is near impossible to design a study that would include these students without also including many more students who are less committed. Furthermore, in reports such as Student Right-to-Know, time limits of one and a half times the length of the degree (three years for "two year" colleges) impose such rigid restrictions that an institution is better served to exclude all but the most traditional educational track.

Figure 3
Proportion of First-time students who are Full-time and Regular Enrollment



	Fa90	Fa91	Fa92	Fa93
Full-time, Regular	312	374	422	435
Other First-time	964	1,164	1,227	1,259

Survey of students who enrolled for one semester only

When persistence rates are used as measures of institutional effectiveness it is appropriate to limit the students included in the study to those who are likely to have long-term educational goals. However, an institution may want to examine student attrition for other reasons and should design the study accordingly.

In the summer of 1994, SJC conducted a study of students who attended for one semester only in the Fall of 1992. Persistence studies have indicated that a high percentage of students come to SJC for only one semester and the college wanted to learn more about these students. Specifically, the study was designed to determine whether these students did not return because they were dissatisfied in some way with the college or because they had successfully achieved the goal they had set for themselves.

The study population was defined by starting with all first-time students in Fall 1992 (N=1194). A subset was identified of those students who had not returned to the college in the three semesters following Fall 1992 (N=400, 34%), eliminating those who were enrolled only in the fitness center (N=46). The study population consisted of 354 students, 30% of the original cohort.

A telephone survey was conducted and responses received from 111 (31%) of the study population. The telephone interviewers asked the following general questions.

1. What was your primary purpose or goal in taking courses at SJC?
2. Did you accomplish the educational goal you had when you enrolled at SJC?
3. What are the reasons why you did not re-enroll at SJC?
4. Do you anticipate re-enrolling at SJC within the next year?

What are the characteristics of the study population?

From student records, we can identify several characteristics of the study population (N=354). These characteristics point to a mixture of purposes for attending SJC. These characteristics will provide some indication of the level of long-term commitment to an educational goal for these students.

Four variables in the Registrar's Student Information System can be used to indicate a commitment to achieving a long-term educational goal: 1) part-time/full-time status, 2) regular/provisional, 3) degree/certificate/neither, and 4) reason for attending SJC. Ninety-two percent (92%) of the study population enrolled as part-time students indicating a low level of initial commitment for these students. Fifty-two percent (52%) of the study population were admitted as regular students and 53% indicated they were seeking a degree or certificate. Under "reasons for attending SJC" (a highly unreliable indicator), 22% indicated their reason was to obtain a certificate or degree. Other reasons for attending were basic skills, 7%; transfer, 10%; job skills, 15%; personal interest, 34%; and other/none, 12%. From these indicators, it appears that at least some of the study pool, maybe between 22% and 53%, intended to pursue a certificate or degree.

Table 2

Characteristics of Study Population

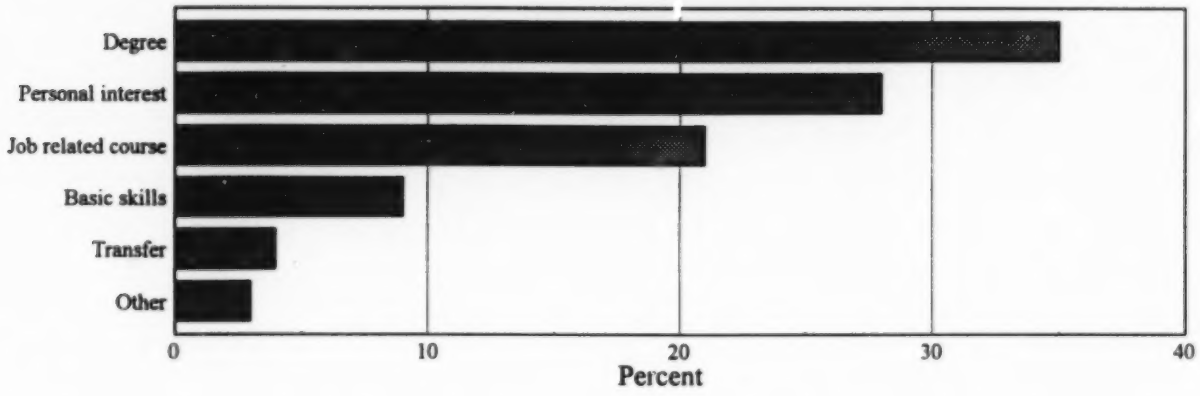
Part-Time	92%
Regular	52%
Degree/Certificate	53%
Reason Attending	
Personal Interest	34%
Degree/Certificate	22%
Job Skills	15%
Transfer	10%
Basic Skills	7%
Other/none	12%

Other characteristics of the study population that are obtainable from the Student Records System are age, cumulative GPA, credit hour enrollment and class meeting times. Fifty percent (50%) of the study population were between the ages of 17 to 27 with a range from age 16 to 85. Forty-eight percent (48%) of the population had a cumulative GPA of zero at the end of the semester which is due in part to audited courses. More than a third of students with a zero GPA enrolled for audit only. Of those with a cumulative GPA higher than zero, 83% left in good standing with a cumulative GPA of 2.0 or better at the end of the semester. Thirty-nine percent (39%) of the population enrolled for one three-credit class. Forty-five percent (45%) of the courses taken were in the Humanities division, 26% in Business, 20% in Math/Science, and only 9% in the Technology division. Forty-five percent (45%) of the courses met in the evening.

SURVEY RESULTS: Primary educational goal and goal attainment

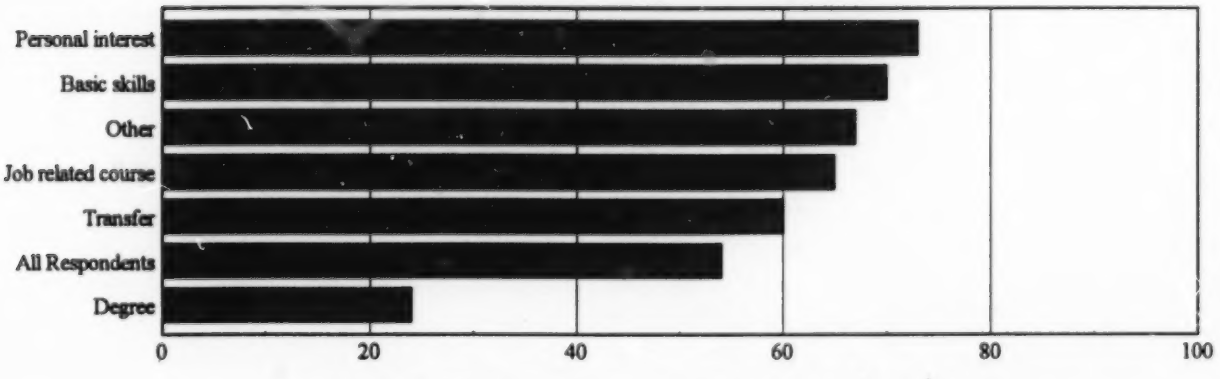
In the survey, 35% of the respondents indicated that their primary purpose in attending SJC was to obtain a degree. The primary goals are shown in the figure below. There is no relationship between the responses to this question in the survey and the educational goal contained in the student record at the time of admission.

Figure 4
What was your primary goal in taking courses at SJC?



Goal attainment by educational goal (indicated in the survey) ranges from 24% for degree seekers to 73% for students enrolling for personal interest. Overall, 54% of the respondents indicated that they had achieved the educational goal they had when they enrolled.

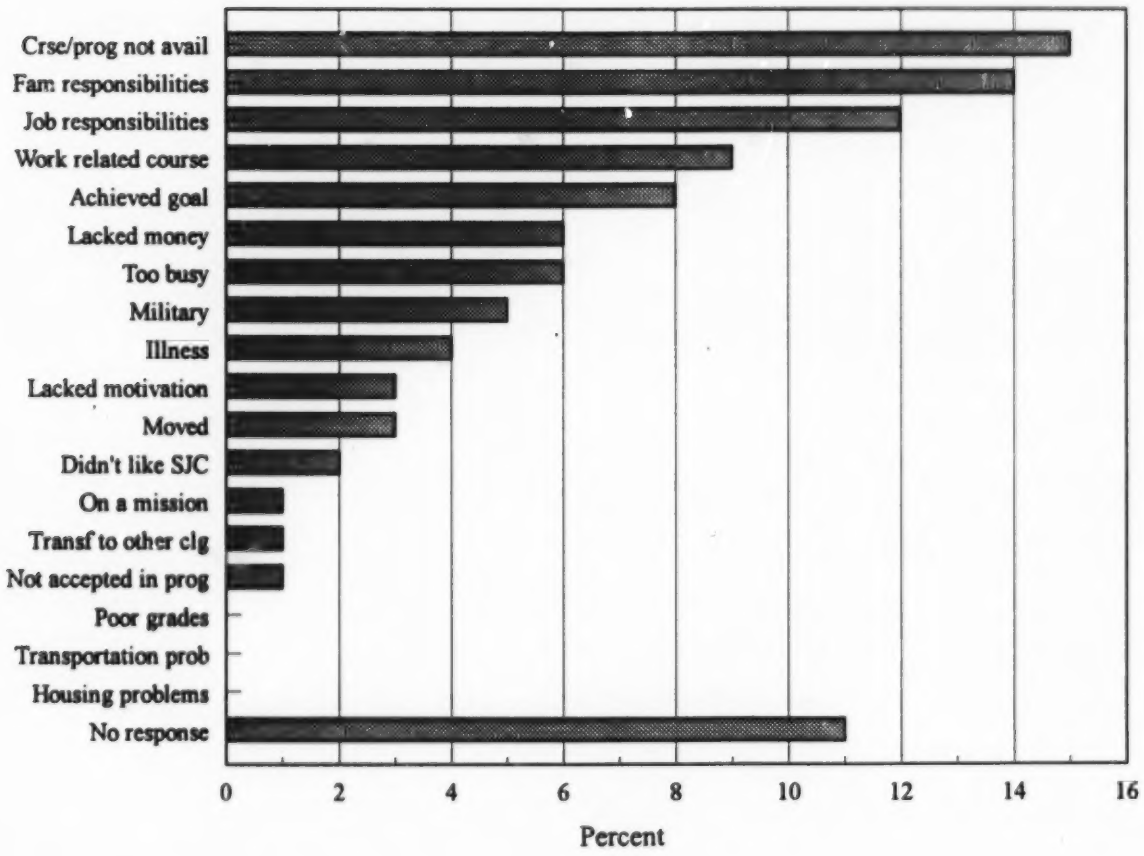
Figure 5
Goal Attainment by Primary Goal



SURVEY RESULTS: Reasons for not returning to SJC

The reasons why the students did not return to SJC are listed in the figure below. The most common reasons given were 1) SJC didn't have the courses or programs wanted (15%), 2) family responsibilities (14%), and 3) job responsibilities (12%). Thirty-two percent (32%) of the respondents selected the "other" option and most provided their own reason for not re-enrolling.

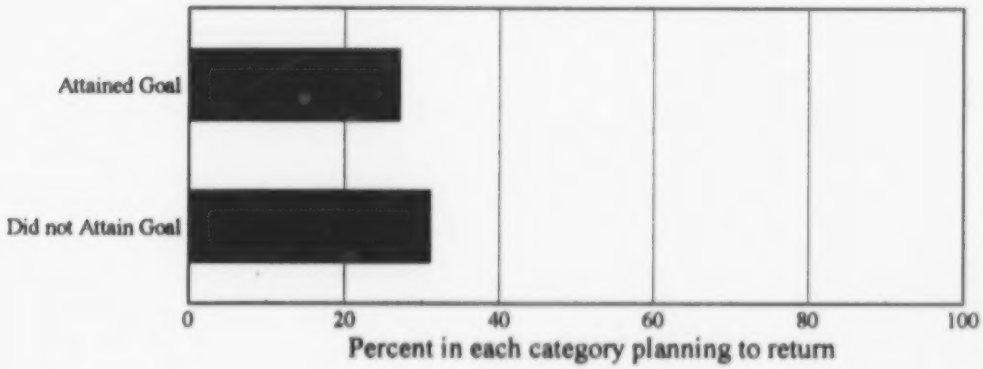
Figure 6
Reasons why you did not re-enroll at SJC?



SURVEY RESULTS: Plans to re-enroll

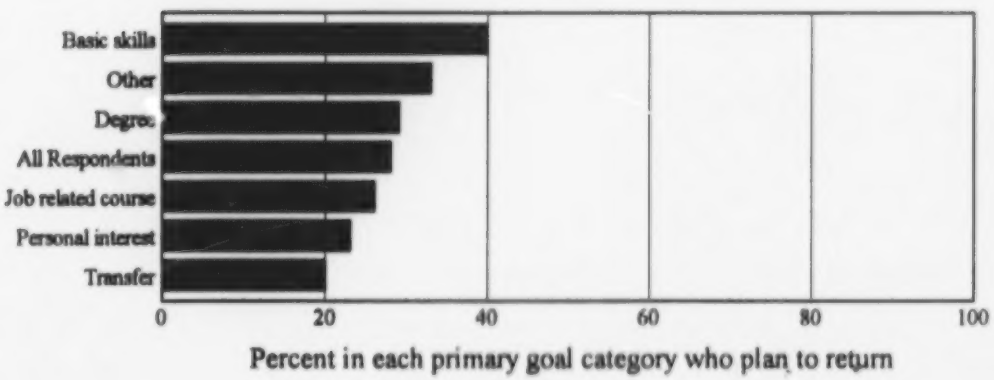
Twenty-eight percent (28%) of the respondents plan to re-enroll at SJC within the next year. Those who plan to re-enroll include both respondents who indicated that they had achieved their goal (48%) and those who had not achieved their goal (52%). The figure below shows intention to re-enroll by goal achievement.

Figure 7
Planning to Return by Goal Attainment



Of those indicating that they plan to re-enroll, 38% have a primary goal of earning a degree and 24% have personal interest as a goal. The proportion of respondents planning to re-enroll within each primary goal is fairly consistent with about 25% planning to re-enroll and 75% with no plans.

Figure 8
Planning to Return by Primary Goal



SURVEY RESULTS: Summary and conclusion

SUMMARY

1. **What was your primary purpose or goal in taking courses at SJC?**
   The most common primary goal was to obtain a degree (35%).

2. **Did you accomplish the educational goal you had when you enrolled at SJC?**
   Overall, 54% of the respondents indicated that they had achieved their goal.

3. **What are the reasons why you did not re-enroll at SJC?**
   The top three reasons for not re-enrolling were 1) courses/programs not available at SJC, 2) family responsibilities, and 3) job responsibilities. These three reasons accounted for 41% of the responses.

4. **Do you anticipate re-enrolling at SJC within the next year?**
   Twenty-eight percent (28%) of the respondents plan to re-enroll within the next year.

CONCLUSION

From this small sample of respondents, it is evident that students who enrolled for one semester in Fall 1992 are not a homogeneous group. It would not be accurate to characterize such students as either casual students who enrolled for personal interest only or, on the other hand, as dissatisfied customers who left before achieving their goal. Neither one is the case. Rather, many of these students had serious educational goals but were unable to continue due to family or job responsibilities. About half of the respondents achieved their initial goal in one semester and a quarter of the respondents plan to take more courses sometime in the future.

The many reasons given for not re-enrolling provide further evidence that attending college is only one of many issues in the lives of community college students, and it is often not the most pressing issue. Students attend community college with a variety of goals that are short-term and long-term; personal, educational, and job-related. For them, semester-to-semester persistence has very little meaning in terms of success, perseverence, or goal attainment.